

J. M. Coetzee's Constructive Ambiguity

A Close Reading of Disgrace and Elizabeth Costello

Kjetil Elvestad Albertsen



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Kjetil Elvetad Albertsen

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which Coetzee removes normative authorial guidance in his *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. The close reading of the novels will focus on their different narrative structure and shared thematic elements. The thesis will show that both novel functions as a space where Coetzee deploys ethical dilemmas he rarely resolves. By doing so he forces the reader to engage with the ambiguous text they are presented, without any moral guidance. The ambiguous nature of the novels, epically *Disgrace*, has resulted in mixed reception, but as will be shown the ambiguity should be understood as constructive because it forces the reader to commit to the texts and their ethical dilemmas.

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Abbreviations

Quotations from the following works are cited in the text through these abbreviations:

D Coetzee, John Maxwell. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage, 2000.

EC Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Penguin Book, 2004.

Introduction

This thesis explores the ways in which John Maxwell Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) make use of constructive ambiguity in order to provoke readers into an ethical dialogue with the text. In *Disgrace* there is a notable absence of ethical authority and the narrative is constructed in such a way that the reader can only rely on himself for moral guidance. In *Elizabeth Costello* the ethical dilemmas appear directly pressing, but the metafictional perspective and the enigmatic nature of the main character denies the reader any definite sense of resolution.

By creating narratives where the authorial presence is constantly questioned, Coetzee constructs a literary space where the reader is forced to engage with, commit to and reflect on these ethical dilemmas. Though the two novels differ in form, they mirror each other thematically. Central to both of the novels, I will be arguing, is the function of language and the value of literature and art in the 21st century. Despite the difference between the two protagonists, they both are somewhat victimized by the 'rational' society they do not feel alienated from.

In both novels we experience how the characters struggle to communicate with the world around them through language. David Lurie is for example able to ridicule a hearing committee with his rhetorical skills, but is unable to communicate with his own daughter. Elizabeth Costello is a famous author who seems to have lost faith in the fiction she has presented to the world. Both protagonists seem to have lesser problems with identifying with animals, which cannot speak, and cling to the discourse of romantic poets and writers.

Coetzee's work is famously ambiguous; *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* are no exceptions. Neither of the novels commit to any ideology, or political or ethical cause. Acknowledging this fact, this is not a thesis that tries to extract a definite meaning out of the text. Instead, it will focus on how certain events of the novels construct a space for discussion and engagement for the reader.

Ever since his first Booker prize in 1983, his international recognition has only grown. The novel *Disgrace* brought Coetzee his second Booker Prize in 1999, which made him the first to have ever won the prize two times. In 2003 he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, which solidified his position as a critically acclaimed writer, and manifested his status as a modern canonized author. In 2006 *Disgrace* received the first place in The Observer's poll for "greatest novels of the last 25 years" of British, Irish or Commonwealth

origin. In addition, Coetzee has received several literary awards including Pirx Femina Etanger and the Jerusalem Prize for Freedom of the Individual Society. Hence, I think it is safe to say that Coetzee is considered one of the 20th century's greatest writers.

There is indeed a quality to his prose that I personally think makes him worthy of such a claim. It is extremely precise and yet one can easily get lost in the layers of meaning that it constructs. Tonje Vold writes; "Coetzee's thinking is so original and consistent (although that invariably means *consistently ambiguous*), that his critics are often left in the role of the ventriloquist dummy" (xiii parenthesis in original). His novels are thus a source of both complacency and frustration, but as Wolfgang Iser reminds us, it is precisely this ambiguity that is a precondition of good literature.

A literary text, Iser claims, must "be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself" (296). His theory concerning the realization of literature, which states that all texts need an active reader in order to be 'konretisiert', is also a fundamental view I base this thesis on. Coetzee's novels, ambiguous as they are, encourage and almost demand an active reader. Iser's theories produce an objective framework for the interpretation of literature as he disregard the notion of searching for the author's intention in order to find the *true meaning*. Looking for definite truth in Coetzee is an action that is bound to fail.

An important aspect of *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* is the notion of authorship. Especially *Elizabeth Costello* is concerned with what authorship is and how it is perceived. The perception of authorship is one of the elements that attracted me to Coetzee in the first place. Coetzee is a canonized white South African author who writes elusive literature in English, with clear connections to European philosophy and literary traditions. This rather complex authorial position poses a conundrum, because it is challenging to determine on what terms one is to read his novels.

Coetzee can be illuminated by so many perspectives, be they postcolonial studies, English literary studies, post apartheid, African or World Literature studies. Up until lately the most common reading has been impacted by the relationship between South Africa and Coetzee, thus he has often been contextualized within the framework of postcolonial studies (Vold viii). Some postcolonial critics have for example efficiently argued that *Disgrace* should be read as cultural and political criticism of the post-apartheid South Africa.¹ Their primary focus seems to be on the rape of Lucy in the middle of the novel and how the society

¹ Disgrace effect

corresponds to the situation. Their argument seems to be that the lack of any formal justice portrays the black community in South Africa as ruthless barbarians with their own social and legal code.

The problem with Coetzee's alleged criticism is thus that it does not correspond to the optimism one might hope to find in post-colonial South Africa. There are no hopes and dreams depicted in *Disgrace*. In her review of *Disgrace*, Nadine Gordimer states, "there is not one black person who is a real human being" (Bradshaw 21). She criticizes him for portraying black people as a separated group with their own ethics and legal system. As she states, "If that's the only truth he could find in the post-apartheid South Africa, I regretted this very much for him" (Munro 297).

He was also accused of deliberately arousing racial tension. Huggan and Watson believe that the critics "demanded of him an explicit form of commitment which his novels evidently eschewed" a statement I believe to be true (3). Reading Coetzee this way is understandable when one takes into consideration where this particular criticism is produced (South Africa), but Coetzee is a writer who often eludes binary opposites and rejects absolute truths, something that is very evident in both *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*.

In the wake of this criticism, another branch of critics have grown more influential, and the relationship between the novel's engagement with western philosophy and ethics have become more dominant. Derek Attridge is perhaps one of the most influential scholars in recent years, and the one I find closest to my own interest in Coetzee. Attridge turns his attention away from the post-colonial significance of Coetzee's texts by focusing his attention on what he calls "the singularity" of these texts. His particular way of reading Coetzee is part of a substantial argument of how one perceives and reads literature in general. Attridge is attempting to specify literature. He seeks to determine if there is something that literature does that no other cultural practice does.

In his books, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) and *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), he, like Iser, argues that literature should not to be understood as an object, but as an *event*. Within this idea there arises a criticism directed towards what he calls "literary instrumentalism," by which he means "the treatment of a text (or other cultural artifact) as a means to a predetermined end" (*Singularity* 6-7).

Attridge is generally critical of the way in which literary studies tries to assert its value by superimposing political, moral, historical or cultural perspectives upon the text. In this sense, while the reading might be taking place as an event, the active reader is still subject to these preexistent literary perspectives.

Attridge's reflections on literary studies are contextualized within a socio-economic framework, and he effectively argues that the instrumental approach is an attempt to create a valuable space within the global market economy. Though he acknowledges the value of such reading, he firmly states that the political influence of literature is highly overrated and that it devaluates "humanistic learning." He argues that it follows a "utilitarian model that reflects a primary interest somewhere other than literature" (*Singularity* 13). One can certainly feel the echo of Susan Sontag's anthologized essay "Against Interpretation" in Attridge's critique of the status quo in contemporary literary studies. In many ways, as we shall see, his demand for openness responds somewhat well to her critic of allegorical readings.

In *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Attridge exemplifies his ideas by implementing them in his readings of Coetzee's novels. Each chapter is devoted to one of Coetzee's books, which is accompanied by a theoretical discussion. It does not take long before one sees the costs of his arguments. In his second chapter, named "Against Allegory: Waiting for the Barbarians & Times if Michael K," Attridge argues against the more or less standard reading of *Waiting for The Barbarians* as an allegorical depiction of South Africa. He firmly states such political readings reduce the value of the work because they do not do justice to the richness of Coetzee's language. According to Attridge one should value the experience of the work "for itself, and not because it pointed to some truths about the world in general or South Africa in the 1970s in particular" (*Ethics* 45).

His most persuasive argument in this regard is found in his close-reading analysis of *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), a book that has also been read in the light of South African politics. In one passage K contemplates whether he believes in helping people or not: "He did not seem to have a belief, or did not seem to have a belief regarding help. Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought" (48). Attridge points out that the (almost) free indirect discourse and particular wording resists allegory, and invites us "to value instead the contingent, the procession, the provincial that keeps moral questions alive. It's not for nothing both the passages we have looked at from the novel have sentences beginning 'Perhaps'. Allegory cannot handle perhapses" (*Ethics* 54).

Though I mostly agree with Attridge's anti-allegorical perspective, I cannot wholly embrace it, as I do believe allegorical readings can produce constructive ideas. There are at least two critics that share my concern about Attridge. One is Mark Sanders, who points out that Attridge is overlooking several strong allegorical readings of Coetzee's novels. He mentions among others "Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who finds an aporia of race and gender

identity politics in *Foe*” (643) and Zoe Wicomb “who reads the novel as staging a hyperbolic repetition of a history of South African racial and sexual violence” (643). The problem with Attridge might be that the costs are too high, and that he is perhaps distancing himself too much from several intelligent voices that have a lot to offer.

Still, the biggest problem is, as Gerald Gaylard also points out, that Attridge insists on his peculiar kind of reading in all the novels; as Gaylard states, “too many of the chapters on individual Coetzee texts are so concerned with alterity that the sense of the individuality of each text becomes diluted” (152). In that respect, one may say that Attridge becomes a victim of his own argument. Still, Attridge certainly has a point. As mentioned above, being a South African writer, Coetzee is often contextualized within the framework of postcolonial studies, and though that can contribute insightful information, this association also reduces the complexity of his works. This is especially true when it comes to *Disgrace*.

In addition, Attridge reads Coetzee in the literary tradition that the texts seem to align themselves with. In other words, his view allows the literary tradition of the texts to overshadow the historical background of the author. Of course, defining Coetzee’s fiction is also problematic.

Coetzee’s fiction has inconclusively been considered as both modernist and post-modernist, and much scholarship has been preoccupied with trying to define his fiction as such. Though little consensus seems to have been reached, I find the term ‘late modernist’² the most fruitful. Huggan and Watson provide a pervasive argument for this view as they point out how many of the defining elements of modernist literature are mirrored in the fiction of Coetzee:

The difficulty – even impossibility – of meaningful communication; the mutability of things; the contingency and absurdity of human existence; the nightmare of history, past and present; and, not least, the confusion, fear and anxiety that follow from any of the foregoing. In short, Coetzee’s work possesses a disquieting vision, with those distinctly apocalyptic, even nihilistic overtones we usually take to be characteristic of the era of international modernism. (5)

² This is the term used by David Atwell, Derek Attridge and Jane Poyner. This is pointed out by Jane Poyner in her book, *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (2009) (20)

There is a passage in *Disgrace*, during David Lurie's hearing, which in many ways exemplifies the troubles of trying to understand Coetzee's work. During the hearing, the novel's protagonist declares himself guilty of charges that he refuses to hear. At a certain point one of the committee members states in frustration, "I want to register an objection to these responses of Professor Lurie's, which I regard as fundamentally evasive. Professor Lurie says he accept the charges. Yet when we try to pin him down on what it is that he actually accepts, all we get is subtle mockery" (*D* 50). Several critics have probably felt this same type of frustration when trying to pin down Coetzee. His fiction has a way of appearing extremely precise, while still just hinting at some kind of truth. Looking for meaning in a Coetzeean novel corresponds to constantly having something on the tip of your tongue. I would argue that reading Coetzee demands openness to the alterity that the novels produce.

Chapter 1 - A Close reading of *Disgrace*

Disgrace was published in 1999, a hundred years after another fiercely debated masterwork situated on the African continent by a white male, namely *Heart of Darkness*. There are several similarities between these two works. Both books are a part of a controversial discussion concerning politics and race, and both books have gained canonical status. The reasons for Coetzee's rapid acceptance into the literary canon are many. Attridge mentions among other things that his writings are located within established European high culture. This relationship between his novels is made especially evident with his use of allusions to canonical literary works. For example, Woodsworth and Byron are used directly in the creation of the narrative.

On many levels the time of its release satisfies the criteria of what Georg Lukács calls a 'great historical period'. Released only five years after official end of the apartheid and at the dawn of the new millennia, it was indeed "a period of transition, a contradictory unity of crisis and renewal, of destruction and rebirth"(211). Lukács puts great responsibility on the shoulders of the realist writers stating that "A great realist [...] sets aside his own prejudices and convictions and describe what he really sees, not what he would prefer to see. This ruthlessness towards their own subjective world-picture is hall-mark of all great realists, in sharp contrast to the second raters." (213) If Lukács's Marxist realism is what one prefers in realistic novels, then Coetzee is indeed a second rater, because the political commitment one might have expected from a South African author to the end of apartheid is not present in *Disgrace*.

Though the text does not challenge the novel genre, it does challenge the reader. The chapters are short and the general plot is easy to follow. David Lurie, once a handsome womanizer and academic scholar, loses everything as he enters into an affair with a young student. Pleading guilty to the charges inevitably brought against him, he is forced to resign at the university where he works and moves out to the countryside to stay with his daughter. He starts working at an animal clinic, executing animals. During a violent home invasion he is badly burned and disfigured. At the end of the novel he is portrayed as a mad old man creating a musical, once supposed to be a grand chamber opera, with a banjo accompanied by a howling dog.

Still, within this simplistic form there arises an intricate story with layers of complexity that is certain to baffle anyone who tries to reach the essence of Coetzee's novel.

At times the thematic elements seem relatively loosely connected, with the mixture of animal rights, South African politics, the function of art and the place of the individual within a time of ‘great rationalization’ all neatly filling the 220 page long narrative.

The problem of a political reading of *Disgrace* might not seem very obvious for anyone who is reading politically. Still, *Disgrace* is a work of art, and as such it is more than just a ‘political’ result of its time. It’s subversiveness and social criticism, with its clinical tone and cold irony make the immense global changes at the end of the 20th century both in South Africa and the rest of the world just a backdrop to a deeper and more intricate thematic complex. Almost every event in the novel establishes new perspectives that lead to new layers of meaning, and few of the thematic issues are ever resolved. Because of this it is tempting to say that *Disgrace*, and its protagonist, resist interpretation. The options are simply too many and the certainties too few. Still, I would argue that the novel’s ambiguousness should be considered as opportunities, not restrictions.

My argument is that Coetzee’s choice of focalization and emotionless narration creates a text that forces the reader to engage with a particular kind of ethic of otherness. The argument is mainly based on Iser’s theory of active participation combined with Derek Attridge’s reading of the novel. Like all texts, *Disgrace* creates a space where the internal story constantly shifts with the outer. What one gains from using Attridge’s perspectives, with his focus on ‘otherness’, is an ethic ‘of alterity’. Applying such a reading can be very helpful if one wants to understand rather than condemn the characters. Still, there is something about the objectivity he demands that seems to be unobtainable. Most readers are bound to bring some preconceptions into the text, but as I wrote in the beginning, one needs to be careful not to write *against* the ambiguity. As we shall see, by putting too much emphasis on some of the novel’s rhetorical signs, Attridge ends up doing exactly that. In the next section I will take a closer look at the narration of the novel.

1.1 Constructive ambiguity in *Disgrace*: Language and Silence

The complexity of the characters and events in the novel is first and foremost derived from the third-person narrator. Though the book is written in the third-person, there is an extreme closeness between the protagonist and the narrative voice, almost bordering on a first-person point of view. Michael G. McDunnah sees the narrator as a mimetic representation of the protagonist and argues that *Disgrace* should be read as an “*overheard text*” (18). By deploying such a rhetorical tool Coetzee makes the narrator “the guarantor of the truth of Lurie’s *subjective* reality: to borrow the words of Mike Marais when he writes ‘the novel

refuses to establish an ‘ironic contract’ between the reader and the author that bypasses the character” (18). Though the novel is focalized through David, it is at times quite difficult to understand whether what we are reading reflects the protagonist’s thoughts or how the protagonist would like us to perceive his thoughts. An example of this can be found in the description of one of David’s sexual encounters with Melaine.

“He takes her back to his house. On the living-room floor, to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her. Her body is clear, simple, in its way perfect; though she is passive throughout, he find the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into blank oblivion” (*D 19*)

Note that while the sexual act is described as lovemaking, the passivity of Melanie hints at the fact that this is far from reciprocal love. Hence, the clinical focalization achieves a constructive ambiguity that calls into question the reality of the actual act and creates a tension between how David wants us to think of this act and his actual thoughts during the act.

In addition to the ambivalence of the narrator, the worldview of the protagonist is also brought into question. It is at times difficult to know whether his reflections are true or just a matter of self-deceit. To illustrate this fact Coetzee makes use of allusions that work on different levels. One level highlights the dual nature of the protagonist, both in terms of how the character sees himself, and how the reader understands him. In addition, as we shall see, some of the allusions also provide direct challenges to readers concerning how to ethically engage with the text.

Lurie thinks of himself as a “disciple of nature poet William Wordsworth.” (*D 116*) In one of his lectures he is, due to the lack of student participation, interpreting one of Wordsworth’s “The Prelude” for them. Talking about how Wordsworth’s sensory experience of Mont Blanc is a disappointment compared to the ‘idea’ he had of the mountain, David comes to the following conclusion:

Yet we cannot live our daily lives in the realm of pure ideas, cocooned from sense-experience. The question is not, How we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaught of reality? The question has to be, Can we find a way for the two to coexist? (*D 22*)

Just like Wordsworth, I believe David is striving for a balance between the pure and idyllic imagination, and the ‘soulless’ reality.

Coetzee also plays with a relationship between David and Byron. Early in the novel the plot is foreshadowed when David talks about Byron's destiny: "He went to Italy to escape a scandal, and settled there. Settled down. Had the last big love-affair of his life" (D 15). The connection between the story of David and Byron is quite clear, but what is even more intriguing is his relation to Byron's character Lucifer in the poem "Lara". During his lecture about the poem he asks; "So, what kind of creature is this Lucifer?" (D 33). The response come from Melanie's friend, whom he perceives as a hostile presence, "He does what he feels like. He doesn't care if it's good or bad. He just does it". Lurie responds: "Exactly. Good or bad, he just does it. He doesn't act on principles but on impulse, and the source of his impulses are dark to him." (D 33) The canny reader will notice how this description of Lucifer could just as easily have been applied to David. David has reached a point where he has little concern for the morality of his actions, good or bad, he just does it. It would be easy to put judgment on David and his action, but this is not what Coetzee wants us to do, not yet. Following up on his characterization of Lucifer, David says to his class:

Not that we are not asked to condemn this being with the mad heart, this being with whom there is something constitutionally wrong. On the contrary, we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: *a thing*, that is, a monster. Finally, Byron will suggest, it will not be possible to love him, not in the deeper, more human sense of the word. He will be condemned to solitude. (D 34)

It is easy to see how this relates to the narrative of *Disgrace*. Just like Lucifer, Lurie is a nearly impossible to like and ends his story in solitude. Likewise, we are not supposed to condemn him.

The characterization of Lucifer as beyond good and evil also shows itself in the narrative voice. It is rare to read a book where the narrative voice is so cold and cynical, and the authorial presence nearly non-existent. McDunnah describes this kind of disengagement as luciferian, which I think is a favorable term to use. It is this cold detachment that is the source of the eerie atmosphere throughout the book. Without any moral guidelines throughout the several disturbing incidents in the novel, the readers are left for themselves, creating another form of constructive ambiguity. The phrase "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (D 25) is just one of many examples where this type of 'matter-of-fact' narration evades ethical judgment in a scene that clearly inhabits

several ethical dilemmas. There are multitudes of examples of this kind of cold observation by the narrator. They produce a tension in the reader and I think it is precisely this tension that Coetzee wants to invoke. The novel forces readers to think for themselves.

Anton Leist and Peter Singer notes that “Readers feel uneasy once the authorial normative guidance is drawn away and frequently angry at being offered only vague hints of how to begin a treatment of the problem at hand” (7). What they describe as ‘vague hints’ is in many ways the way in which the novel conveys its ethical dilemmas. Perhaps the scene that illustrates this fact more than any is David Lurie’s hearing. This is arguably one of the most baffling incidents in the book. Lurie accepts the charges stated against him and declares that he is guilty as charged without having read Melanie’s statement. When the committee urges him to state his position he says, “I have stated my position. I am guilty” (D 49), they then ask him “guilty of what” (ibid), and he responds “guilty of all that I am charged with” (D 49). The committee becomes annoyed and accuses him of ‘talking them in circles’, and that he is just ‘going through the motions’. At the end they finally confront him with the pressing ethical dilemma: “Don’t play games with us, David. There is a difference between pleading guilty to a charge and admitting you were wrong, and you know that” (D 54). At this point, nothing David says, or could say, can be taken serious and the entire hearing has been turned into a mere joke. When he goes outside, the press confronts him, and when asked if he regretted anything he states, “I was enriched by the experience” (D 56). Lurie is in other words not a repentant sinner. In his own way he actually seems rather proud for acting on his impulses as a “servant of Eros” (D 52).

The scene creates a lot of space for interpretation. The dominant reading is that this is an allegorical reference to the South African Truth Commission (TRC). Though there are no direct references to TRC, the allegory seems pressingly obvious.³ For its immediate audience it is understandable that the allegorical reference relating the incident to the TRC must have felt provocative. If combined with Lucy’s rape scene, and the following lack of consequences, you could say that the condemnation of Coetzee is almost understandable, but there is of course a Coetzeean duality here as well that deserves our attention.

Simone Drichel argues in her article “Disgrace (1999)” (2011) that the incident is an allegorical reference to the TRC, but that the question that arises from the intricate scenario is also bigger than a particular situation in South Africa. Drichel uses Derrida and Levinas to show how the scene illustrates the difference between law and justice. Quoting Derrida,

³ Tonje Vold’s *At the Heart of Coetzee* (2010) discusses the relationship between the hearing and TRC.

Drichel points out that “law is not justice” (152), and further: “Law is the element of calculation, and it is just there be law, but just is incalculable, it demands that one calculate with the incalculable” (152). In addition justice “always addresses itself to singularity, to the singularity of the other” (152).

The problem for the reader of *Disgrace*, in relation to this context, is of course that we have no way of knowing Melanie’s (the other) feelings, seeing as the narrator is so connected to David. The reader is never really allowed insight to any of the other characters. We do not know how Melanie feels about her interaction with David. The phrase “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (25), cold and detached as it is, of course leads us to understand that it is clear that David clearly misuses his power, both as a man and as her professor, indicating that this is in fact rape. Still, the problem that is left completely open is the question of what justice would be for this singular other, though David’s mockery of the inquiry certainly feels like neither justice nor law.

When talking about the incident with his daughter Lucy, David highlights the fact that his admittance of guilt was a “secular plea” (*D* 58). He goes further and says, “Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse.” (*D* 58) The statement shows the reader that Lurie indeed is aware that by aligning himself with the secular law he denies Melanie justice and the chance for forgiveness, because forgiveness, Derrida claims, “belongs to a “religious heritage” (Drichel 153). David’s insistence on the secular nature of his plea illustrates the focus of language in the novel.

Along with the questions of language, and the relationship between guilt, law and justice, there is also an element of shame. David, being the perpetrator, is publically shamed and disgraced for what he seems to believe is a private matter. David never admits to, or shows any, feelings of shame, but his eagerness for the hearing to end without ever hearing the charges, combined with his escape to the countryside, indicates that he on some level feels humiliated. Indeed, even the novel’s title, *Disgrace*, points towards this humiliation which contrasts so starkly with the cold narration. The issue of shame can be used to questions David’s intentions. If shame is his main reason for wanting to end the hearing early, then perhaps his principles are not as important to him as he makes them out to be. There is no reason to doubt that David is convinced that his “case rests on the rights of desire” (*D* 89), and that he believes himself to be a victim of a puritan society. Still, there is reason to doubt that David is not just using this as another excuse to lie to himself and to use

this as another way of escaping his shame. This also explains the hypocrisy of demanding justice for the rape of his daughter.

Melanie's rape is paralleled later in the novel as Lucy, David's daughter, is raped by a group of black men. Once again Coetzee leaves the victim's story out of the narrative. During the attack David is knocked down and set on fire and thus there is no description of what happens to Lucy. She further refuses to talk about it with David because she considers the rape to be "a purely private matter" (*D* 112). The fact that the accounts of both victims are left out of the narrative brings the parallels closer together, and many have noted David's inability to see the parallel between the rape of his daughter and the crime he himself committed. This ethical task is in other words completely left to the reader, something that portrays the immense commitment the novel demands.

We never really get to know why Lucy reacts so passively to her rape. She refuses to press charges against the perpetrators and instead decides to marry Petrus, the afrikaan neighbor who seemingly has a relationship with at least one of the attackers, for protection. It is precisely this fact that incited the controversial reception, but what they fail to see is that it is also this fact that creates the alterity of the novel.

Gayatri Spivak provides an interesting reading of Lucy. According to Spivak, Lucy's response to the rape is not about her accepting the situation, as much as it is about her controlling it. Hence her passive response is a "refusal to be raped" (21). She claims that by silencing Lucy, the reader is provoked since, "No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading" (21). As she argues, this provocation then leads the reader to use the novel's rhetorical signs to counterfocalize and further infer her motivations in keeping the rape a private matter.

Spivak asserts that in order to understand Lucy the 'canny reader' needs to see the intertextuality between *Disgrace*, *King Lear* and *The Trial*, Lucy being intertextual with the former and David the latter. She states:

In the arrangement of counterfocalization within the validating institution of the novel, the second half of *Disgrace* makes the subaltern speak, but does not presume to give "voice," either to Petrus or Lucy. This is not the novel's failure, but rather a politically fastidious awareness of the limits of its powers. (Spivak 24)

Spivak further warns us that, "If we, like Lurie, ignore the enigma of Lucy, the novel, being fully focalized precisely by Lurie, can be made to say every racist thing" (24).

Support in Spivak's claim can be found in some of the rhetorical tools used by the novel. Towards the end, after David has had an argument with Lucy about her baby, a subsequent consequence of the rape, Lucy tells him "You behave as everything I do is part of story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through" (*D* 198). Her utterance works on several levels because to the reader she is exactly that, a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Thus the text becomes an instance of metatext, where Lucy addresses the reader as much as the protagonist, something that produces several layers of language, which in turn increases the novel's ambiguity.

At the same time Lucy's silence portrays David's inability to communicate. In one of their conversations in the wake of the rape David is trying to convince Lucy to press charges against her attackers. David is unable to understand Lucy's motivation to remain silent. In what turns into a fierce argument David exclaims, "Is this some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" (*D* 112) To which Lucy responds, "No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that I can't help you" (*D* 112). It becomes clear that David, lecturer in communication, who so consciously has maneuvered his way through the previous hearing with his rhetorical skills, is not able to constructively communicate with his own daughter.

The same can be said about the other characters as well. David is elitist, and as such he is not above using his language in order to manifest, to his own mind, his position. We also see this when he contemplates the friendly bond Bev Shaw tries to seal with him over a cup of tea. After the home invasion Bill meets David and Lucy at the police station. Though David is somewhat surprised, having only met Bill for tea once before, Bill says "What else are friends for? You would have done the same." (*D* 102) David cynically sorts to etymology to convince himself that Shaw is simple man. "Modern English *friend* from Old English *freond*, from *freon*, to love. Does the drinking of tea seal a love-bond, in the eyes of Bill Shaw?" (*D* 102). At the same time we are made aware of how David's pretentious understanding makes it nearly impossible for him to see past the 'otherness' of the people surrounding him.

We have so far looked at the how the luciferian narrative voice, combined with the restricted focalization creates ambiguity in the novel. In the next section, I will look more closely at how these narrative layers bring out aspects of transition.

Thematic dimensions

Time is generally a reoccurring theme *Disgrace*. In several ways David Lurie's fall into disgrace is due to his inability to adapt to 'the times'. Attridge has pointed towards several references to 'the times' in the novel, and recontextualizes the historical and political context of the book. He argues that 'the times' do not refer to the local changes in South Africa, but that they instead signify global phenomenon. As an example he uses the scene where David talks with his ex-wife, and argues that the utterance "Don't expect any sympathy from me David, and don't expect any sympathy from anyone else either. No sympathy, no mercy, not in this day and age" (*D* 44) is not a comment on their situation in South Africa, but the situation in the world. Attridge states that: "there are many places other than South Africa where Rosalind's comment would not have seem very unusual" (*Ethics* 167). His attempts to turn the readers attention away from South African politics and towards more universal aspects are admirable, and I agree with him to a certain point, but his argument becomes forced.

As we shall see, there are elements in this book that demand the South African context. Thus, I propose that the different references to 'these times' inhabit multilayered references to three different dimensions; global, national and individual. The effect of the frequent use of the phrase is not only to pin point the exact moment in time the narrative takes place, but also to illustrate how times change. These dimensions are not separated from each other, but instead they work together to create an intense presence of *transition*. I believe that by looking at how the element of transition frames the novels thematic elements, we can begin to understand David. If we begin, like Attridge, with focusing on the global phenomenon present in the text, it is possible to agree that the, perhaps overlooked, element of globalization is truly vital in understanding the world in which David no longer belongs.

His place at the university is diminished because of what David calls 'the great rationalization'. The reduced value of his academic expertise, in world that no longer sees a practical value in arts and literature, is probably recognizable for many. David Lurie is a fifty-two years old, divorced scholar with special knowledge about modern language and poetry that is no longer being taught, or even respected, at the university where he works. He is *allowed* to teach a course on Romantic poetry, but the apparent apathy of his students makes his only class with any significance to him a rather dreary affair. His other classes are Communications 101 and 201, but he has no belief in what he is communicating to his students.

Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline, he finds its first premise, as enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook, preposterous: 'Human society created language in order that we may communicate out thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other.' His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lies in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul. (*D* 4)

In our rational world it seems reasonable to assume that humans at some point created language to exchange information, but David Lurie, lecturer in communication, looks back to eighteenth century philosophers to find conviction. The fact that song is used to 'fill the empty human soul' seems as a pompous statement that indicates Lurie's escapism in romantic poetry. His relation to romantic poetry is more than just a keen interest. Lurie constantly uses poetry to justify his impulsive actions, especially those related to sex. Lurie is a self-proclaimed servant of Eros. To blame 'Eros' and 'desire' for his atrocious choices in life, is perhaps a way for him to avoid dealing with a deeper identity crisis, one that even runs deeper than his apparent sexual problem.

'The problem of sex' is already touched upon in the first sentence of the novel. Coetzee writes: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (*D* 1). Twenty-one words into the novel and we are already made aware of the detachment between the protagonist and the world that surrounds him. To solve what he calls 'the problem of sex', he sees a prostitute named Soroya once a week. Seeing as "ninety minutes a week of a woman's company is enough to make him happy" (*D* 5), the arrangement is satisfying for David until the point where it eventually breaks down. The reason for the disintegration is that they see each other on the street while she is with her children. The exchange between them is described as a glance "he regrets at once" (*D* 6). When they meet again, everything is, for some reason, ruined. Here Coetzee constructs a big gap in the text. We are never made aware of why Soroya's children make it impossible for them to maintain a professional relationship. The only information we are given of the arrangement's decline is that, "he feels a growing coolness as she transforms herself into just another client" (*D* 7).

Attridge sees David's encounters with Soroya as an attempt to solve 'the problem of sex' in a rational way, and thus the breakdown of this arrangement signalizes the fact that David fails in his attempt to find rational solutions to his 'problem' (*Ethics* 166). Still, it is also possible to see that this encounter dissolves the illusion David had about their relationship. During their time together "an affection has grown up in him for her" (*D* 2) and

he truly believes that they are lucky to have found each other. Seeing as we never get to read Soroya's side of it, it is not even sure that the alleged coolness is in fact a new thing for Soroya. For all we know, David was always 'just another client', and he has perhaps overestimated the mutuality of his affection. Perhaps that is the reason that she never shared anything about herself even though he felt the freedom to "share the facts of his life" with her.

The lie David has been telling himself is grounded in the fact that he is seeking the nostalgic feeling of being desired. David is in other words clearly in a state of transition on a personal level as well, and he is quite concerned about his aging. It is apparent that old age makes him feel unwanted and powerless. The narrator tells us that "without warning his power fled [...] if he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often, in one way or another, to buy her" (D 7). After his arrangement with Soroya ends, he considers castration, which is described as "not the most graceful of solutions, but then again aging is not a graceful business" (D 9). The subject of castration also comes up later in the novel. During a discussion of human and animal nature, David states he would prefer being shot to being 'fixed' (D 90). Still, after Lucy questions him about it, he contemplates: "Sometimes I have felt just the opposite. That desire is a burden we well could do without" (D 90). This shows that David, whether he is willing to admit it or not, is aware that desire has too much power over him. His fixation with sex (or *desire* as he prefers to call it) is what sets in motion his affair with the young student Melanie, and thus indirectly the reason why he moves to the countryside.

As the setting shifts from metropolitan Cape Town to rural South Africa, the effects of the national transition at the end of Apartheid makes itself more pressing. In addition, the narrative becomes somewhat darker, and there is less frequent use of irony that has previously set a lighter tone in the otherwise bleak narrative. Traces of the old South Africa are found in the dogs that are "bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man" (D 110) and the "fortress-like police station surrounded by a two-metre topped with razor wire" (D 153). Still, while the country's change is starkly evident, it is David's personal failure in adapting to this transition that is being highlighted.

Petrus has been read as both a symbol of the old and the new South Africa. His role in the narrative is ambiguous as he is a flat character that is difficult to fully understand. Aside from his ambitiousness, there are few adjectives that can be used to describe him. As Kenneth Reinhart argues, while there is an ambivalent conflict between Lucy and Petrus, both before and after the rape, those conflicts are not a matter of master-servant (101). Still, Petrus is

perhaps the strongest link between the former master-slave relationships that have been all too present in South Africa during Apartheid. David notes:

In the old days one could have had it out with Petrus. In the old days one could have had it out to the extent of losing one's temper and sending him packing and hiring someone in his place. But though Petrus is paid a wage, Petrus is no longer, strictly speaking, hired help. It hard to say what Petrus it, strictly speaking. The word that seems to serve best, however, is *neighbor*. (D 116)

While there are grounds for ascribing Petrus the role as an emblem of the shift of power in South Africa, the novel cautions us: "Doubtless Petrus has been through a lot, doubtless he has a story to tell. He would not mind hearing Petrus's story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth in South Africa" (D 117). Petrus is more than just an allegorical figure, however the relentless focalization denies us the possibility of fully reading him. Traces of Apartheid also make themselves felt in David's encounter with Pollux, one of the people who raped his daughter and thus a potential father of his grandchild. When David sees him, he reacts with anger: "Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: *Teach him a lesson, Show him his place*" (D 206). Still, the novel avoids making this a racial commentary. David's rage is not founded upon an outer anger towards a black boy, instead it is a rage originating from primal man: "This is what it is like to be a savage" (D 206).

The setting shift also highlights David's deeply rooted personal problems. Rural South Africa could have been a place for him to explore his self-proclaimed Wordsworthian love of nature, but instead it only emphasizes that, for better or for worse (mostly worse), it is the *desire for women*, and not *nature* that is his true passion. This is particularly evident as he sees his sexual encounter with Bev Shaw as his rock bottom. After this encounter he philosophizes:

Let me not forget this day, he tells himself, lysing beside her when they are spent. After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this. [...] Is she is poor, he is bankrupt. (D 150)

The novel's shift of settings then does not in any way change David's deeply rooted problems, thus disconnecting any political developments from character developments.

So far in this chapter, I have shown have shown how *transition* frames the narrative, and that the different settings in the novel explore different dimensions of transition. This

chapter has also looked at how the novel eludes singular interpretations by withdrawing any authorial presence in the text, by adding layers of meaning through allusion, and by portraying problems without resolving them. Still, before moving on to the subplots in *Disgrace* relating to the opera and animals, I would like to briefly take a look at one of the scenes towards the end of the novel where David meets Mr. Isaacs family.

Noting again the issue of unresolved problems, it is interesting that Coetzee constructs a scene where David is given the opportunity for true redemption. After his stay at Lucy's farm, he decides to visit Melanie's father. We never get to know what impulse drives him, but then again neither does David: "He wants to speak his heart. The question is what is on his heart" (*D* 165). It would be comforting to know that he goes there for some sort of redemption, but his thoughts about Melanie's younger sister leave little hope that David has changed. He finds her very attractive and notes in his typical way: "Desiree, the desired one. Surely they tempted the gods by giving her a name like that! [...] the two of them in the same bed: an experience fit for a king" (*D* 164). The lack of any noticeable character development is also expressed in the text. The narrator's focus on what David "does not say" (*D* 164) when talking to Desiree brings back images of what "he should have said" (*D* 37) earlier in the novel when he was talking to Mr. Isaacs before the hearing. Seeing as the father is not at the house, he visits him at the school where he works. After awkwardly explaining his side of the story as "one of those sudden little adventures that men of a certain kind have" (*D* 166) he is invited back to the house to break bread the same evening. After the dinner he finally apologizes to Melanie's family, but the fact that David still seems to be somewhat oblivious to the nature of his mistakes makes it difficult to understand whether his apology to Melanie's father is sincere or not.

Responding to David's apology, Mr. Isaacs challenges David by asking "The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry?" (*D* 172), to which David responds, "trying to accept disgrace as my state of being" (*D* 172). Mr. Isaacs pushes David even further and insinuates that David had another motive for showing up, at which point David gets infuriated, storms into the room where Melanie's mother and sister are and kneels before them. This pathetic attempt to apologize is the closest David gets to redemption for what he did to Melanie, the sincerity and motivation for it all being somewhat questionable.

We are then witnesses as he retraces his steps. He reaffirms his principles at the trial to Rosalind and he nurtures his old desire for Melanie. "Deep inside him the smell of her is stored, the smell of a mate. Does she remember his smell too?" (*D* 190). He goes to see her in a place where he meets Melanie's boyfriend again, though we learn his name is Ryan this

time, who once again tells him to 'stay with his own kind' (*D* 194). On the way home he also looks to his old solution to 'the problem of sex' by picking up a prostitute, another young woman. After they have finished their act, he thinks to himself "*So this is all it takes! [...] How could I ever have forgotten it?*" (*D* 194).

This is perhaps the part where the novel is at its most frustrating. David Lurie has been through a lot, and we the reader with him, and despite that, the novel refuses both him and us any sense of closure. This, I argue, is the essence of the novel's ambiguity. The reader is left with several problems that are left unresolved. As such, it is up to the active reader to judge for himself what to make of them. For example, in the scene where David goes to apologize to Mr. Issac and his family, the novel evades taking a stance on several thematic elements. These are the same elements that are mirrored earlier in the novel during the hearing. Mr. Isaac's talk about God echoes the earlier thematic construction of the relationship between the secular law and religious forgiveness. Still, the novel, in all its elusiveness, denies the protagonist what the reader reasonably could expect to be his time of true redemption. Thus any sense of closure to the ethical dilemma escapes us.

What, on the other hand, is at some level resolved is David's acceptance of his disgrace. He does actually, if not full-heartedly, apologize for an act I do not think he fully regrets, and I think his pathetic kneeling is a way to accept the shame he once tried to escape. This, I argue, is the closest thing we come to closure on the subject of David's violation of Melanie. All the other thematic options are there for the reader to indulge, but a complete reading, founded in one truth is impossible.

David's decision to kill Driepoot, the dog that he has grown so fond of, at the end of novel creates a similar problem. It is difficult to say whether the ending creates a feeling of closure. As he walks into the cage the dog seems to be full of life, yet he still decides to kill him: "Bearing him in the arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. 'I thought you would keep him for another week,' says Bev Shaw. 'Are you giving him up?' Yes, I am giving him up'" (*D* 220). The ending, like so many other parts of the novel, has been the source of a lot of critical speculation (Drichel 164-166). Is this the point where David is able to singularize the animal? Is he, by killing the dog, giving himself up? Is this an allegory to the bleak outlook to the 'new South Africa'? Or is this love? I think a more fruitful line of thinking is to see the alterity of the event as a sign of the novel's success. It is both unsatisfying and perfect at the same time because it more than anything else shows the power of literary alterity.

Additional layers of meaning; the subplots in *Disgrace*

Noting once again the dehumanizing effects of 20th century globalism, Lucy reflects on the status of dogs: “They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them as things” (*D* 78). Before his time in the countryside David, like most, has done little reflection about his feelings towards animals: “Do I like animals? I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them” (*D* 81). During his stay at Lucy’s farm, his relation to animals goes through a drastic change. David’s growing fondness for animals and further concern for giving them a dignified death is certainly a baffling element in the character’s development. Attridge claims there is a connection between his interest in animals and art. The reasons are that “Animals and art provide the substance of Lurie’s new existence” (*Ethics* 176) and that “neither of these constitutes any kind of answer or a way out, while at the same time it conveys or produces - in a way that only literature can do - an experience, beyond rationality and measured productivity, of their fundamental value” (*Ethics* 177). Though I agree with Attridge’s first point, I only halfway agree with the second. Though his love of animals does not constitute a way out, the novel hardly depicts it as ‘an experience beyond rationality’. On the subject of his need for treating dead dogs gracefully, David notes that, “There must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world.” (*D* 146)

Attridge does well in noticing that David notices his altered relation to animals in retrospect. In addition, he is spot on when he notes that David’s connection to the animals is not any way typical of an animal lover or an upholder of animal rights (*Ethics* 176). Still, though David does not portray himself as either of those things, both of them are clearly a present issue in the novel. David’s growing affection for animals and his mission to give them an honorable departure is one of the few things that portray any sympathetic development: “He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (*D* 219). Love is something I imagine is a rare thing for David to experience, and for him to develop a loving bond between all the animals he kills is indeed an important progression.

There is a duality in the way Coetzee uses animals in the novel. In a discussion with Lucy, ‘a dog’ becomes the symbol of humiliation.

‘Yes, I agree, it’s humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, nor rights, no dignity.’

‘Like a dog.’
‘Yes like a dog.’ (D 205)

There seems to be a general consensus that David’s love for the dogs he kills is grounded in the fact that he is able to acknowledge their singularity, and that Coetzee thus broadens the ethical dimensions of the novel, but there is a disagreement in what the dogs represent.

Simone Drichel sees the inclusion of animals as an interspecies drama, which works as a secondary plot to the interhuman drama that unfolds (149). The dog then, is a symbol of the fragility of South Africa and just as David is able to overcome the ‘otherness’ of the dogs, so must people be able to see each other’s singularity. I find myself agreeing with Adriaan Van Heerden when he writes: “By reconnecting with animals and learning to treat them with kindness and respect, we will also rediscover ourselves as animals and human and treat our fellow human beings and ourselves with respect” (56), but at the same time there is another level of David’s engagement with the animals that needs to be explored.

A part of his growing sympathy for the dogs can perhaps be found in the fact that both David and the dogs have lost their function in the South Africa. The dogs are no longer needed as guard-dogs, and David is no longer needed as a scholar, or a father.

The novel’s inclusion of the subplot about David’s creation of an opera about Byron is indeed enigmatic. The opera seems to mirror the story of David himself. In the beginning it illustrates how out of place he is at the university: “The truth is, he is tired of criticism, tired of prose measured by the yard. What he wants to write is music: *Byron in Italy*, a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera” (D 4). His reason for making it is, according to David, “to leave something behind” (D 63) despite the fact that he has already published several critical works.

The fact that he thinks very little of his academic works also highlights his relation to romantic poetry and his displacement in the ‘age of rationalization’. Still, despite his wish for the opera to be his legacy, it does not engage him as much as he would like. The reader is only reminded every now and then that ‘the Byron Project’ is still something David is contemplating. When it comes up, it has usually transgressed into something smaller than the original idea; “Now I’m inclined the other way, toward a very meager accompaniment - violin, cello, oboe or maybe a bassoon” (D 63).

As the novel progresses the opera becomes a more integrated part of the narrative, and towards the end several pages are devoted almost entirely to the opera. Back in Cape Town, after his experiences at the farm, he is able to admit that, “There is something misconceived

about it, something that does not come from the heart” (D 181). He starts again with a slightly different story. Byron is no longer the hero; instead the tale is about the aging Teresa, Byron’s old lover. Bit by bit, the musical piece is starting to come together and the reader is invited to take part in the creative process. We see how the banjo becomes the only right instrument to accompany the story, the piano sounding too rich. We see how the opera turns form elegiac to comic, and we see how the story finds him: “So this is art, he thinks, and this is how it does work! How strange! How fascinating!” (D 185).

His experiences echo what Coetzee himself has said of the matter:

“As you write – I am speaking of any kind of writing - you have a feel of whether you are getting closer to “it” or not.... It is naïve to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the contrary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you wanted to say. What it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place. That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us. Writing shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago.” (*Doubling* 18)

The inclusion of artistic creation adds to the already multilayered narrative. At one level, as noted, the musical piece mirrors David and is one of the few elements in the novel that full-heartedly shows any character progression. The romantic hero Byron is, like himself, reduced to a ghost.

The lyrics express David’s problems of separating art and life: “*out of poets I learned love*, chants Byron [...] *but life, I found [...] is another story*” (D 185). Teresa too is projection of David. He describes her as full of desires waiting for someone to “suck the venom from her” (D 185). As David states, “That is what Soroya and the others were for: to suck the complex proteins out of his blood like snake-venom, leaving him clear-headed and dry” (D 185). There is also another voice that speaks to him. Allegra, Byron’s neglected daughter who calls to Byron, “*Why have you left me? Come fetch me!*” (D 186). This is not Lucy calling to David. Lucy is far more independent and, as we know, she never needed David’s presence. Instead, this is David coming to terms with his own failure as a father, and perhaps a latent wish to be needed. As such, the opera is not so much about David’s ability to singularize ‘the other’ presences in his life, as it is about him starting to understand himself.

Attridge, as mentioned, perceives the opera as way for Coetzee to show the value of art in a world where art seems to have lost a lot of its function, and I believe that this is right. Yet, the opera also serves as a comment on the function of art, and indeed *Disgrace* itself. Thinking about his opera, David notes: “As for recognizing it, he will leave that to the scholars of the future, if there are still scholars by then. For he will not hear the note himself, when it comes, if it comes – he knows too much about art and the ways of art to expect that” (*D* 214). Just like David leaves his opera, so has Coetzee left us this novel, and it is up to the reader to engage, commit, and reflect on it.

Chapter 2 - A close reading of *Elizabeth Costello*

A lot has been written about the similarities between Elizabeth Costello and J. M. Coetzee. They are both acclaimed authors from previous British colonies (actually the same colony as Coetzee became an Australian citizen in 2006), their literature is rooted in the European high cultural tradition, they are both educated in philosophy and art, and they both have a huge compassion for animal rights. Even their names have certain articulate similarities. In fact, the similarities are so strong that Elizabeth is at times perceived as more or less the same person as Coetzee, with the difference in gender being the only thing that creates a small distance between the two.

Karen Dawn and Peter Singer go so far as to state that “when Elizabeth speaks on animal issues, she is, in essence, speaking for the author.” (110) Dawn and Singer are not alone in reading Costello and Coetzee as the same person, but not everyone considers this as beneficial. In her review of *Elizabeth Costello*, Hermoine Lee regards it as a somewhat cowardly way of “guarding his voice in her ‘beliefs’ and arguments” (Lee, “Review: Elizabeth Costello By JM Coetzee”). Though they do not agree whether the connection between Costello and Coetzee is beneficiary or not, there is a similarity between them in that their shared understanding of Costello makes them treat the text as lectures, not literature.

This is a simplification that fails to acknowledge the ethical dimensions that the works of literary art demands form the reader. On his chapter on *Elizabeth Costello*, Attridge writes “what has mattered for Elizabeth Costello and for the reader, is the event - literary and ethical at the same time-of storytelling, of testing, of self-questioning, an not the outcome” (*Ethics* 205). The act of reading something as literature, as opposed to something else, invokes a different set of assumptions in a competent reader. Although the author may infuse his creation with autobiographical similarities, the reader should resist the impulse to read the two as one; on the contrary these similarities should arouse suspicion.

All literature is in some way or another derived from something familiar. As we saw in the previous chapter, David Lurie’s comical opera is not an invention from thin air. There are bits and pieces of David in all his artistic creations, but not in form of a direct reflection of himself. The same is true about Coetzee and Costello, or Coetzee and

Lurie for that matter. One could arguably ascribe certain characteristic elements of David to Coetzee as well. Both are middle-aged, inclined towards academia, and both in the position of being white South Africans during the end of the apartheid.

Coetzee has, in an interview with David Atwell, noted how irresponsibility is part of the creative process when writing fiction:

Stories are defined by their irresponsibility: they are, in the judgment of Swift's Houynnhms, "that which is not." The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, or irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility of something that has not yet emerged, that lies ahead somewhere at the end of the road. When I write criticism, on the other hand, I am always aware of a responsibility toward a goal that has been set for me not only by the argument, not only by the whole philosophical tradition into which I am implicitly inserting myself, but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself. (*Doubling the point* 246)

Just as there are different assumptions invoked in a reader when reading literature, there are also completely different sets of criteria involved when writing fiction, as opposed to criticism. The novel's chapters are called 'lessons', but the lessons are not necessarily found in Elizabeth lectures. In chapter three, she makes it clear that she is an old woman who no longer has the time to say things she does not mean, and her lectures are at times extremely direct, and yet there is an element of doubt scattered throughout the chapters.

At times Elizabeth is not able to live up to the ethical tasks she so expressively talks about, and throughout the novel she contradicts herself. Like *Disgrace* then, *Elizabeth Costello* is not a novel that resolves any of its dilemmas, and the reader is again forced to commit and engage with the text. The fact that she does not state her 'beliefs' at the end, and thus never walks through the gate to whatever may await her there, seems to me as the sign that we are supposed to reflect upon Elizabeth's insecurities just as much as her certainties.

Before moving on, there is a need to write a little about the publication history of *Elizabeth Costello*. Most of the sections of the book were published before the novel came out. A version of the first lesson "Realism" was published in *Salamagundi* in 1997 under the title "What is Realism?" after giving a lecture under the same name at Bennington College. Lessons 3 and 4 were published as a short volume called *Lives of*

Animals in 1999. *Lives of Animals*, which arguably is the piece that has gotten the most attention, was originally Coetzee's contribution to the Tanner Lectures.

The written publicized version of *Lives of Animals* was edited by Amy Gutmann and accompanied by four reflective responses written by Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger and Barbara Smuts. They all have very different responses. Peter Singer, not yet sure what to make of the novel, and hence obviously frustrated, engages the text with a metafictional response (85-92), Wendy Doniger respond with a text about different culture's ethical treatment of animals (93-106), and Smuts reads her own experience of living with baboons into Elisabeth Costello arguments (107-120).

Being a literary critic, Marjorie Garber, on the other hand, is the only one who seeks the distinctly literary aspects of the text (73-84). In the final passage of her reflection Garber writes: "In these two elegant lectures we thought John Coetzee was talking about animals. Could it be, however, that all along he was really asking, "What is the value of literature?" (84). Following up on Majorie Garbers claim, I argue that both *Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello* have metafictional qualities that are largely about the value of literature.

Unlike *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello* has an unconventional structure. Whereas the plot in *Disgrace* flows pleasantly, the plot in *Elizabeth Costello* is hardly cohesive at all. Instead each chapter is structured around isolated events in the protagonist's life. In each chapter Costello is, in one way or another, faced with ethical dilemmas that can be connected to the question of language and literature. Seeing as *Disgrace* and *Lives of Animals* were published the same year, and several of the chapters were published in close proximity to both of them, it is perhaps not surprising that they contain a lot of the same thematic elements. In *Elizabeth Costello*, we revisit thematic explorations of the present state of the humanities, ethical treatment of animals, and artistic creation. In addition, the readers are reacquainted with our old friend 'Eros', and they are witnesses to another near-rape scene, which Costello, like Lucy, claims, "belongs to her and her alone" (EC 166).

The close proximity of the themes in these two novels creates a temptation to read the latter as a comment on the former. It would for example be easy to read the inclusion of the rape scene in *Elizabeth Costello* and the protagonist's successive thoughts about it as a way for Coetzee to explain himself for not including any depictions of the rape in *Disgrace*. Still, as mentioned, the novel *Elizabeth Costello* is a

singular work of art, and hence the character Elizabeth Costello is a work of fiction who should be read on her own terms.

Realism; its value and its limits

As we have seen; even though the setting of *Disgrace* takes place in South Africa, the novel eludes the kind of realism that Luckas demands from the 'great realist writers'. According to James Meffan, his lack of commitment to this type of realism is in fact something Nadine Gordimer has criticized Coetzee for earlier in his career. Gordimer, who reads his earlier novels as political allegories and thus found them full of political engagement, does not see allegory as the right way to write about South Africa (Meffan 178). In this light, the lack of committed realism in *Disgrace* can be seen as skepticism towards that literary mode, a skepticism we also see in *Elizabeth Costello*.

In the first chapter of the novel, neither the narrator or Elizabeth seem to have much faith in realism. In an early part of the chapter the narrator shows himself as a presence in the text: "Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can only exist in things" (EC 9). The implication here is of course that realism is a failed project, because it relies on illusions to construct the 'reality'. The narrator's view mirrors what Coetzee himself said about realism in an interview with David Atwell in *Doubling the Point*: "Illusionism is, of course, a word for what is usually called realism. The most accomplished illusionism yields the most convincing realist effect" (EC 27).

Still, as mentioned, the narrator constantly makes his presence known throughout the chapter and thereby breaking the illusion. The narrator, for example, marks what would have been unnoticed gaps in the text by inferring "we skip" (EC 2), or "There is a scene in the restaurant, mainly dialogue, which we will skip" (EC 7). Attridge notes that by deploying this postmodernist trick Coetzee shows, "that the realistic illusion can survive the author's showing of his or her hand" (*Ethics* 201). Coetzee himself calls the literary tool 'anti illusionism', deeming it as "impasse" (*doubling* 27)

Anti-illusionism—displaying the tricks you are using instead of hiding them—is a common ploy of postmodernism. But in the end there is only so much mileage to be got out of the ploy. Anti-illusionism is, I suspect, only marking of time, a phase of recuperation, in the history of the novel. The question is, what's next? (*doubling* 27)

The post-modernistic presence of the narrator gives the reader of *Elizabeth Costello* hints to the interpretation of the text (*Ethics* 201). Since realism needs to embed ideas in things, the narrator claims that,

The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated form the matrix of the individual interest out of which their speaker act in the world. (*EC* 9)

By making us aware that realism embodies its ideas in the text's characters or events, Elizabeth undermines that realism by discussing it overtly. Realism is also under scrutiny during Elizabeth's lecture later on. She uses Kafka's monkey from "A Report to an Academy" to show the uncertainties, or perhaps opportunities, Kafka's text produces, and thus that the reader "will never know, with certainty, what is really going on in this story." (*EC* 19) She goes on:

There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe that when the text said, "On the table stood a glass of water," there was indeed a table, and glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them. 'But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems. (*EC* 19)

Commenting on this, Meffan points out that Costello, with this quote, acknowledges Barthes' view that 'the author is dead' and that it is now the reader who has the power to construct meaning (183-184). The ultimate consequence is of course that true mimetic reflection of the world is impossible to achieve, and hence that realism, as a mode, is faulty (184).

At the same time, as Attridge also points out, her delve into realism can be seen as "a revelation of her uncertainties and fears about the status of writing and of language more generally, and by implication a question of the value of the art to which she has devoted her life" (*Ethics* 201). Elizabeth is an author, and as such the inconsistency of language is particularly important to her. If words do not have a singular reference, then what is the value of her work?

Another person who struggles a great deal with the inconsistency of language is Elizabeth Chandos. *Elizabeth Costello* does not end with a 'lesson', but with a postscript. The postscript takes form as a letter from Ms. Chandos to Francis Bacon where she begs him for guidance as she and her husband experience somewhat of a crisis.

All is allegory, says my Phillip. Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself says he, is at one moment a dog and the next a vessel of revelation. And perhaps he speaks the truth, perhaps in the mind of our Creator. (our *Creator*, I say) where we whirl about as if in a millrace we interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousands. But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how? *We are not made for revelation* (EC 229)

Chandos' question is not only a literary question. Her and Phillip's crisis is due to the failure of language to reflect their reality. She signs the letter Elizabeth C, something that creates a parallel with Elizabeth Costello, and we can see how Costello's problems with literary representation can be expanded to the problem of the limits of language.

Turning our focus back on Elizabeth's exploration of realism, we can start by noticing the relation between realism and reason. As Ian Watt reminds us, "Modern Realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses: it has its origins in Descartes and Locke" (EC 8). Hence, Costello's attack on Descartes' *reason* in chapter three and four (previously known as *Life of Animals*) can also be seen as a continuation of her inspection of literary realism. In the following chapter Costello questions the notion of reason.

The first readers of *Lives of Animals* did not have the structural benefit of the surrounding chapters that the readers of *Elizabeth Costello* have. Still, Coetzee has not made a lot of changes, though some of the information about Elizabeth has been moved to other chapters. The fact that she is most famous for her novel *The House on Eccles Street*, which is a story about the fictional character Marion Bloom for *Ulysses*, has for example been moved to the first chapter and I would argue that there was indeed enough signs to make it clear to the reader that there was more to the novella than just the ethical treatment of animals.

The chapters are focalized through John, but there are less frequent inputs from him than in "Realism". What we learn is that he is not so comfortable with his mother being a fighter for animal rights as he is about his mother being an author. By making John the focalizer, the reader is subsequently turned into spectators of Elizabeth's lecture. This means that role of reader is a double one. We are both spectators of the lessons and we are readers of the novel. As spectators, we take part in the direct arguings⁴ that Elizabeth performs, but as readers we take part in the overarching literary event, with the latter overshadowing the former.

In her first lecture, Costello points out the anthropomorphic nature of Descartes's argument that "reason and the universe are of the same being" (EC 67). To Elizabeth, "reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. On the contrary, reason looks to [her] suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of a tendency in the human thought" (EC 67). With this in mind she attacks the notion that this idea of *reason* is what should lead to the conclusion that "man is godlike, animals thinglike" (EC 67). She further makes it clear that she conceives the modern treatments of animals as equivalent to the Holocaust.

Though Costello's direct and provocative analogy between the Holocaust and the modern industry of meat production is perhaps the most eye-catching element of the lecture, there is also an apparent question here relating to the role of fiction. Costello does not seem to want the audience to regard her lectures as truths or principles. She says so directly after answering a question to her first monologue: "I was hoping not to have to enunciate principles,' [...] If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says" (EC 82). Costello speaks to the audience as a writer, not as a philosopher, and as a writer she is very much aware of how language, and especially literature, works. Her talk then, is not a one-way argumentation, but instead a space for the reader to (self)-reflect.

Elizabeth asserts, "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bound to the sympathetic imagination" (EC 80). Yet it is the exact failure of sympathy that made it possible for the Nazis to commit their crimes. She considers the failure to engage sympathetically with animals as an

⁴ I use 'arguings' instead of 'arguments' because I agree with Attridge when he writes that they should be seen as "utterances made by individuals in concrete situations—wholly unlike the paradigmatic philosophical argument, which implicitly lays claim to a timeless, spaceless, subjectless condition as it pursues its logic. (*Ethics* 198)

equivalent horror. Sympathy, she says, “has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, the ‘another’” (EC 79). To prove her point, she resorts to her own experiences as an author, claiming that if she could think her “way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then [she] can think her way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee” (EC 80).

Another writer who, according to Costello, has a sympathetic imagination is Ted Hughes. In his poem “The Jaguar” he is “inhabiting another body” (EC 96), namely the body of a jaguar in captivity. Hence, the poets are able to understand animals in a way that philosophers cannot. During the lecture one of the students critically asks what Elizabeth makes of Hughes being a sheep rancher, to which Elizabeth replies, “writers teach us more than they are aware of.” (EC 97) ‘Poetic invention’ enables readers to *be* the jaguar for a brief while, and to overcome the ‘otherness’. It is in these events of literature that it proves itself to be both powerful and valuable.

There is social criticism embedded in her talk about animals and literature as well, which is less obvious than the description of humans as cruel because of their cruelty towards animals. We see that the English department of Appleton College is not highly regarded. Before the second lecture John notes; “The English department is staging it. They are holding it in the seminar room, so I don’t think they are expecting a big audience” (EC 91).

This particular note struck a chord in Marjorie Garber, who as member of an English department, has felt this kind of skepticism first hand (Coetzee and Gutmann 74). Costello’s more direct criticism is directed towards how the quest for *knowledge* seems to be end-oriented. In “Philosophers and the Animals” she talks about a monkey named Sultan. Sultan was the most gifted ‘student’ of Wolfgang Köhler, who did psychological research on chimpanzees. Every time Köhler made a new problem for Sultan to solve, Sultan solved it with his logical skills. For Elizabeth, Köhler’s experiments are not seen as proof of the chimp’s intelligence, but instead an example of humans’ reductive reasoning. There is no space for the chimp to come ask any other question than the one that makes it possible for him to eat:

At every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought. From the purity of speculation (Why do men behave like this?) he is relentlessly propelled towards lower, practical, instrumental reason (How does one use this to get that?) and

thus towards acceptance of himself as primarily an organism with an appetite that needs to be satisfied. (EC 73)

The anthropomorphism, and not *apedom*, was what Köhler was searching for, and in his instrumental quest, the chimp was forced to think instrumentally. It is in its instrumentality that *reason* has failed: “A poet would have made something of the moment when the captive chimpanzees lope around the compound in a circle” (EC 74). Still, though Elizabeth seems to have belief in poetry, she is also concerned about how instrumentalism has infiltrated the arts. This is made evident when she criticizes the orthodox reading of *A Modest Proposal*, “which is stuffed down the throats of young readers” (EC 101). The juxtaposition of Sultan and ‘the young readers’ is fairly obvious, and it is clear that Elizabeth is critical of what she seemingly sees as an ‘end-oriented’ focus. In the words of Derrida, “reason is only one species of thought” (16), and while interpreting Heidegger he says:

[I]f today’s university, locus of modern science, is ‘grounded on the principle of grounding,’ that is, on reason, nowhere do we encounter within it the principle of reason itself, nowhere is this principle thought through, scrutinized, interrogated as to its meaning. (Derrida 10)

As we have seen in the previous chapter, David Lurie is forced teach Communication instead of Classic and Modern Language. And his utter contempt for the fundamental premise of his new subject, illustrates a deep divide in modern academia. One where reason has become an end unto itself, and other modes of thought are supplanted in the name of utilitarian value.

At the same time, we see that the use of animals illustrates the same point, namely that animals are perceived from a rationalistic point of view. People see animals as functional entities like food or guard-dogs. It is precisely this functionality that both David and Elizabeth, in different ways, endeavor to overcome.

Elizabeth seems to have an extreme sympathetic imagination. In chapter six, we truly see the powerful effect that literature can have when Elizabeth questions her own response to Paul Watt’s *The Very Rich Hours of Count Con Stauffenberg*. It is especially the chapters that depict the execution of the plotters who tried to assassinate Hitler that upsets her. Her newfound beliefs that there should be an ethical limitation in realistic literature came to her as she was reading; “He made her read, *excited* her to read. For

that she will not easily forgive him" (*EC* 179). Her reaction to the novel leads her to make it the central issue of a talk she is giving at a conference about evil in Amsterdam. Her question for the talk is: "Can anyone, she asks in her lecture, wander as deep as Paul West does into the Nazi forest of horrors and emerge unscathed?" (*EC* 161).

Elizabeth believes that by entering into the minds of the people who once worked as Hitler's hangmen, West has been touched by the devil, and further liberates the devil through the pages of his book. This leads her to think that not all spaces should be explored.

There are many things that it is like, this storytelling business. One of them (So she says in one of the paragraphs she has not crossed out yet) is a bottle with a genie in it. When the storyteller opens the bottle, the genie is released into the world, and it costs all hell to get him back in again. Her position, her revised position, her position in the twilight of life: better, on the whole, that the genie stay in the bottle. (*EC* 167)

To her dismay, she finds out that Paul West is attending the conference as well, which makes her question her own conviction. She tries to find a way to reshape her thesis, but ends up advocating her belief that there is a need for censorship in literature. Before the lecture, she seeks out Paul West in order to prepare him for what to expect, but West does not respond to her tentative apology. Neither does he respond to the lecture she gives and thus the reader is left without any comparative views. The novel thus refuses the reader both a debate between Elizabeth and West, which could have served to illuminate the questions at hand, and an answer on the topic from Elizabeth. Still, despite excluding Mr. West's views on the matter, the text challenges the reader through Elizabeth's doubt and memories.

In her attempt to understand her emotional response to the novel she thinks back to her first encounter with evil, which took form of a sexual assault when she was nineteen. The description of the assault is quite graphic. She was badly beaten and she suffered a broken jaw. She does not remember the man's name, but she does remember that, "He liked hurting her, she could see it; probably liked it more than he would have liked sex" (*EC* 165). She has never revealed this episode to anyone, or used this in her writing. To Elizabeth, the event is purely a private one, an episode that does not belong in literature.

In many ways the assault mirrors her view on death: "Death is a private matter; the artist should not invade the deaths of others" (EC 174). And yet, the episode that Elizabeth keeps in silence, "a silence she hopes to preserve to the grave" (EC 166), is exposed to the reader of the novel. By removing any direct responses from the characters, and instead advance the issue in the text itself the reader is forced to commit to Elizabeth's ethical dilemma. Are we, as Elizabeth, guilty of an excited reading of evil? Has this reading deprived us in any way?

According to Stephen Mulhall, the answer to the latter question seems to be yes. He writes that readers who read the entire chapter, "confirm the accuracy of Costello's diagnosis, by manifesting exactly the same rivenness that she identifies in herself—not wanting to do what we are nevertheless not only wanting to do but doing, our very humanity driving us to imagine what we know will deprave us" (211). Mulhall further notes that the consequence of this is that the reader's relation to Coetzee is the same as Costello's to West "thereby enacting in our own experience the breakdown of barriers between author, character and reader that Costello present to us within the text as morally maddening" (211-212).

Still, at the end she contemplates her lecture and seems to give Paul West then benefit of the doubt. She thinks to herself:

Was she deluded? *I do not want to read this*, she said to herself; yet she had gone on reading, excited despite herself. *The devil is leading me on*: what kind of excuse is that? Paul West was only doing his writerly duty, In the person of his hangman he was opening her eyes to human depravity in another of its manifold forms. In the persons of the hangman's victims he was reminding her of what poor, forked quivering creatures we all are. What is wrong with that? (EC 178)

This contemplation makes her own role, both in terms of her as a reader, and her role as a writer. "She did not want to read but she read; a violence was done to her but she conspired in the violation. *He made me do it*, she says, yet she makes other do it." (EC 181) This can be seen both as a comment upon the horrors we just read, but also of her

awareness that she herself has created a possibility for evil to thrive through her own realistic novels.

Throughout the novel, artistic creation and the author's role are constantly explored. One essential part of this is, of course, the fact that Elizabeth is an author. In addition, she became famous for writing about a character made up by another author, namely James Joyce. Still, I would instead like to focus on Elizabeth's son, John. John seems to be an exemplary son who takes the utmost care his mother, despite feeling a certain grudge that she somewhat neglected him as a child. John says "My point of view does not matter. I came for Elizabeth Costello's sake. Hers is the point that matters" (*EC* 24). This, of course, is not true at all for the reader of the novel. John is the focalizer, thus his observations and contemplation carry much weight by default.

John is an associate professor of physics and astronomy at Appleton College, but he still understands the convention of literary discourse. We see this clearly during a conversation he has with his mother. Elizabeth points out that she is surrounded by authors that she considers lightweights. She asks John "Am I not heavyweight for them?" To which John responds that she is in fact a heavyweight but that what she written has "yet been demonstrated to be a problem" (*EC* 8) and therefore she is just "an example of writing. An example of how someone of your station and your generation and your origin writes. An instance" (*EC* 8). Elizabeth finds John's view insulting. It has after all always been important for her not to write like anyone else, and therefore she seems to find it frustrating that the singularity of her work is not appreciated.

At several times we find John observing and questioning the labels that are forced upon his mother. After the interview between Susan Mobeius and his mother, he asks Susan, "I got the feeling during the interview that you see her solely as a woman writer or a woman's writer. Would you still consider her a key writer if she were a man?" What John is insinuating here is that Costello, a female writer, is thus placed within the discourse of female writers, implying that this takes precedence over the singularity of her work.

John ends up spending the night with Susan. The morning after Susan says, "You think I have been using you. You think I have been trying to reach your mother through you" (*EC* 27). After admitting she is partly right, John responds by telling her: "You know there is something special about my mother - that is what draws you to her - yet

when you meet her she turns out to be just an ordinary woman. You can't square the two. You want an explanation" (EC 27). Though John never provides an answer, the implication here is that Susan is looking for the author, but as Foucault writes, "In order to 'rediscover' an author in a work, modern criticism uses methods similar to those that Christian exegesis employed when trying to prove the value of a text by its author's saintliness" (287). She is in other words looking for 'the sanctified author' who she has found in the text, but that is not the same person as the one she meets. Susan is looking for something that which exists in the division between the writer and the fictional narrator. John, who knows both the author and the person, is more aware of this. He has seen how his mother "transforms herself into the person television wants her to be" (EC 29).

The human/author dichotomy is an important aspect of the novel. Throughout the chapters it is at times difficult to know whether it is the novelist or the person who is speaking, but most of Elizabeth's lectures seem to derive from emotional sentiments. That is for example evident in chapter six "The Problem of Evil," where her talk about ethical limits in realistic literature is not a well thought through argument, but rather a response to her shocking emotional commitment to a Paul West's novel. It is the 'author' Elizabeth Costello, who is later invited to Appleton College to hold a talk, and yet she does not speak about her novels. Instead the "fleshy, white-haired lady" (EC 60) seemingly gives a lecture on animal rights. At the end of the novel the difference between 'the author' and 'the person' is very much highlighted. The last chapter "At the Gate" is set in a dreamlike world describes as 'Kafkaesque'. Whether Elizabeth is dead at this point is not made clear, but it seems reasonable to assume that she at least stands at the threshold of death. Elizabeth's feeble state has been pointed out several places in the novel, especially in John's last words in the chapter four: "there, there [...] It will soon be over" (EC 115), thus exposing her death-fixated state.

In "At the Gate" she needs to 'state her beliefs' in front of a row of judges in order to be allowed to pass the gate. Though one might expect Elizabeth to express her belief in animal rights or literature, she instead makes it clear that "It is not my profession to believe, just to write" (EC 194). Like David Lurie, Elizabeth does not want to abide by the guidelines of the court. As an author Elizabeth wants to be exempted from the rule that "*every petitioner at the gate should hold to one or more beliefs*" (EC 195). Several critics find this somewhat baffling but Attridge points out that there "is no inconsistency

between Costello's disclaimer in 'At the Gate' and her passionate expression of beliefs elsewhere; the former, she makes clear, refers to her existence as a novelist, whereas the latter arises out of her experience as a human being" (*Ethics* 204).

During Elizabeth's first trial she tries to maintain her position as a disbeliever. She says that "I am a writer, and what I write is what I hear. I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages" (*EC* 199). As a secretary of the invisible, Elizabeth must give voice to all who choose to speak through her without judgment, be they children or murderers, something which is a complete reversal of her previous convictions that surfaced in "The Problem of Evil," which arguably proves Attridge's point that it is the author Elizabeth who is speaking. Predictably her statement does not impress the court, and she is sent back to her dormitory.

While she is waiting for her next trial she contemplates what she could have said; "*I believe in the irrepressible human spirit*: that is what she should have told the judges" (*EC* 207). Yet, despite the urge to pass the gate, Elizabeth refuses to pretend to believe. During the second trial on she is able to passionately state that she believes in frogs. She states to the court, "It is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them. And that is, this afternoon, in this lamentably rushed and lamentably literary presentation for which I again apologize" (*EC* 217-218).

Whether this speech makes it possible for her to pass the gate is not is not revealed. At the end Elizabeth is talking to the gatekeeper. She asks him "Do you see many people like me, people in my situation?" (*EC* 224), to which the gatekeeper replies, "We see people like you all the time" (*EC* 225). Again, I believe the essence of this chapter can be found in the insecurities that Elizabeth portrays. During the period between the first and the second trial she contemplates her own art,

Her books teach nothing, preach nothing; they merely spell out, as clear as they can, how people lived in a certain time and place. More modestly put, they spell out how one person lived, one among billions: the person whom she, to herself, calls *she*, and whom others call *Elizabeth Costello* (*EC* 207-208).

In many ways, this quote captures several of the aspects that have been touched upon in this thesis with regard to authorship. Despite the fact that authors only create a structure with

words, characters and events, the reader is there to engage with the text and create the meaning. We have seen in *Elizabeth Costello* how Elizabeth's novels have, for better or for worse, become part of discourses and contributed to new ideas. In addition, we have seen how Elizabeth created something out of James Joyce's novel.

The fact that "Her books teach nothing, preach nothing; they merely spell out, as clear as they can, how people lived in a certain time and place" (*EC* 207), also reminds me very much of *Disgrace*, a novel that prides itself with its detached narration, something that portrays Coetzee's awareness of his own fiction. The quote then highlights the value of literature, because it shows that nothing else can produce ideas the way literature does.

Conclusion

In these two novels, Coetzee has created a contemplative space in which different themes are played out but not necessarily resolved. This should not be seen lack of commitment on the author's part instead a challenge to the reader. It has been one of key elements of my close-reading of these novels to show how Coetzee constructs ambiguity in his texts, and further how this ambiguity is constructive in the sense that it balances perfectly the 'gaps' Iser demands of good literature. As such the notion of Coetzee's reputation as a modern canonized author is well deserved.

Both novels a range of thematic elements, and I would argue that it is almost impossible to the novels complexity. In the case of *Disgrace*, a sort of anti-bildungsroman for the 21th. century, it's clash between the old and the new on several layers that constantly keeps readers searching for definite meaning. The complex thematic structure of the work stands in stark contrast to the fluency of its prose, and we are lulled into a sense of clarity by Coetzee's masterful workmanship. It is not before one engages the text with the attention it deserves that one understands how intricate the novel is. In the case of *Elizabeth Costello*, it's strong metafiction tendencies combined with the uncertainties and contradictions of the main character, the limits of realistic fiction and the novel genre is testes.

In chapter one I showed how the emotionless and detached narration leaves the reader without moral guidance, something that leaves the reader with the responsibility of making their own ethical judgements. I also showed how the narrative is constructed around three different dimensions; global, national and individual. This construction is in many ways the reason for the novels mixed reception, because the different dimensions can be sources for different perspectives, ranging from the psychoanalytical to post-colonial. Still, it is only when one take into account the relationship between them that one can truly see the richness of what the novel has to offer.

In chapter two I argued that *Elizabeth Costello*, despite it's unconventional structure should be read as a novel because it is only when one treats the text as literature, and thus recognizing under which pretenses it has been written, that one can fully engage with the text. I have shown that the 'lessons' of novel is not necessarily is found in the arguments that Elizabeth presents on her travels to different universities or other institutions, but in her insecurities.

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